Beyond Academics:

A Case for bringing Comprehensive Sexuality Education to Indian Classrooms

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Discussion Paper

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About the Author

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ABSTRACT

India is the second-most populous country globally, with the largest youth population between ages 10 to 24. Despite a young and culturally diverse demography, India has consistently deprioritised knowledge, awareness, and acceptance of comprehensive sexuality education [CSE] for its youth. Many children reach adulthood with negative, conflicting, and harmful messages about sexuality, which are often exacerbated by embarrassment and silence from adults around them. Especially in a traditionally inclined country like India, societal conservatism discourages open and informed discussions about human sexuality and sexual health. This leaves the natural curiosity of adolescents in the hands of equally unaware peers and/or the internet. Despite this dangerous precedent, the new National Education Policy of India issued in 2020 does not mention CSE and its ever-present need for India's youth.

This discussion paper attempts to clarify the concepts covered within a CSE curriculum. It also sheds some light on India's statistics regarding many social and sexual-health related challenges prevalent in the country today. It further charts the troubled journey of CSE implementation in India since its independence and the current status of CSE. It concludes by highlighting some key policy recommendations for an effective and holistic CSE implementation in India.

INTRODUCTION: ADDRESSING THE SILENCE AROUND COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION

India is the second-most populous country globally, with the largest youth population between ages 10 to 24 (World Population Review n.d.). Despite its young and culturally-diverse demography, India has consistently deprioritised knowledge, awareness, and acceptance of comprehensive sexuality education [CSE], also known as sexuality education [SE], for its youth. CSE is defined by UNESCO (2018:16) as "a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality, which aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to: realise their health, well-being and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and, understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives."

Many children reach adulthood with negative, conflicting, and harmful messages about sexuality. These emotions are often aggravated because of embarrassment and silence from adults around them (ibid: 12). Especially in a traditionally inclined country like India, societal conservatism discourages open and informed discussions about human sexuality and sexual health. This can often leave children's natural curiosity, to know about their body and identity, in the hands of equally unaware peers and/or the internet. With over 15 crore Indians between ages 13 to 18 having access to their own social media accounts and digital presence (Kemp 2021), the internet has become an easy substitute to gain knowledge. Adolescents prefer it to bringing up their concerns to adults around them. However, online media does not necessarily provide age-appropriate, evidence-based facts, but can rather provide biased and distorted messaging, making it difficult for young people to distinguish between accurate and inaccurate information.

One consequence of this absence of appropriate sources of information is unethical pornography consumption in India. For instance, PornHub reported a steep 95% rise of Indian youth viewership on their website during the start of COVID-19 lockdown (Kannan 2020). If CSE is implemented in schools, it will offer a forum for young people to understand and make sense of the images, practices, norms, and sexual scripts they observe through social media and pornography in a safe and controlled manner. Implementing CSE can help young people navigate the internet and social media safely and identify correct and factual information (UNESCO 2018:85). While CSE is proven to foster healthy development among adolescents, it also helps young children recognise and protect themselves against various sexual crimes, harassment, bullying, and other negative experiences prevalent in India today, especially among underage children.

Young children undergo a multitude of problems. In 2019, India reported the maximum number of child sexual abuse imagery cases (Sindwani 2019). 109 children, of all genders, are sexually abused every day (National Crime Record Bureau 2021). 4 out of every 10 transgender persons reportedly faced sexual abuse before turning 18 (Chaturvedi 2017). Besides sexual assault, the Teacher Foundation's survey disclosed that close to 40% of children between grades 4 to 12 said they suffered bullying and harassment by peers on school campuses (Gyanesh 2017). The number of parents reporting that their child has been cyber-bullied is the highest in India (Cook 2021). Unfortunately, India's cyberbullying cases are only expected to go up following the shift of both private and public education to online mediums in 2020.

Furthermore, lack of sexuality education hinders the empowerment of all marginalised groups, especially women and LGBTQIA+ individuals, allowing a regressive patriarchal mindset to run through generations. This problem is evident from the statistics that 1 in every 3 women has likely experienced intimate partner violence in India (Pande et al., 2017). Consequently, the latest National Family Health Survey finds that over 50% of women in 5 Indian states think that it is justified for a man to beat his wife (International Institute for Population Sciences 2021).

Although India has taken some concrete legislative measures to tackle socio-cultural issues like gender-based bullying and harassment, child sexual abuse, and other related crimes through strict laws, the only way to decrease such issues in the long run is by adopting active, accurate, and mandatory education on gender, sex, and sexuality from an early age (UNESCO 2018:36). A successfully grade-wise implemented CSE in schools can help countries achieve UN Sustainable Development Goals like quality education (UN-SDG 4), gender equality (UN-SDG 5), and reduced inequalities (UN-SDG 6). The 8 Key Concepts highlighted by UNESCO's international technical guidance on CSE curriculum are relationships, values, rights and culture, understanding gender, violence and staying safe, skills for health and wellbeing, the human body development, sexuality and sexual behaviour, sexual and reproductive health. The subparts of these 8 concepts are outlined and segregated in an age-appropriate manner. (UNESCO 2018:36)

Despite the pressing need for CSE, it finds no mention in India's National Education Policy of 2020. 'Sex Education' has been subsumed under the component of "[e]thical and moral reasoning" (Ministry of Human Resource Development 2020: 15). It is done with the intent to advance "[b]asic health and safety training, as a service to oneself and to those around us" (The Bastion 2020). Therefore, with no national curriculum or framework for CSE implementation, educational institutions have the liberty to either avoid CSE workshops for their students or independently design them. This can potentially promote scientifically inaccurate information such as sexual abstinence instead of sexual safety awareness and reinstate heteronormative biases and binary gender segregation.

FRAMING THE PROBLEM: INDIA'S TURBULENT HISTORY WITH COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION

CSE has sifted through many cultural and political obstacles in India over the last five decades. The need to introduce CSE in schools was first brought up in 1976 at a seminar held by Indian Council for Child and Welfare [ICCW], where attendees were urged to de-shame the subject and get families and teachers involved in its implementation (Dey 2015). Much later, in 2006, a formal 'Adolescence Education Program' [AEP] was established. The AEP model aims to "provide young people with accurate, age-appropriate and culturally relevant information, promote healthy attitudes and develop skills to enable them to respond to real-life situations effectively" (National Council for Education and Research Training [NCERT] n.d.). However, it is essential to note that AEP did not set out a clear objective to provide CSE but addressed issues with a stronger focus on developing overall life skills. Though barely comprehensive in its content and approach as per UNESCO's technical guidance on CSE, AEP has run into many bureaucratic controversies since its inception. Twelve state governments in India banned its implementation in 2007 (Yadavar 2018) and its enactment in other states remains unclear to this day. Such deep-rooted opposition from bureaucrats hindered AEP's national implementation.

The government of India launched another national 'Health and Wellness Curriculum' in February 2020, which falls under the School Health Program of its Ayushmann Bharat Scheme (NCERT 2020). This curriculum was jointly formulated by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Ministry of Human Resource Development, and NCERT. This curriculum guideline includes a comprehensive list of topics such as emotional and mental wellbeing, sexual health, moral values, personal safety, and so on. According to the official document, it is expected to be rolled out in a phased manner for secondary and senior secondary schools only. However, the resource material for classroom implementation is yet to be formalised. The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in 2020 made matters worse, leaving its implementation in the lurch. This shows that despite the nationally recognised value of sexuality education, efforts towards its implementation have been provisional, non-holistic, and have not come with any safeguard against the public backlash.

WAY FORWARD: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO ENABLING COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION IN INDIAN SCHOOLS

Given India's history with CSE implementation, several things are clear. Despite bureaucratic efforts, public opinion and myths have come in the way of executing CSE in schools. Secondly, it has often been de-prioritised or cushioned in different terminologies to circumvent public backlash. Finally, educational institutions have often treated this as a health-related workshop instead of a socially-conscious wellness curriculum which is important for all age groups. Keeping these concerns in mind, the approach to CSE implementation should involve all stakeholders and be multifaceted to achieve a scalable impact.

Active advocacy: challenging stigmas around CSE on a community level

The real challenges to delivering Comprehensive Sexuality Education lie outside the classroom. Regressive schools of thought around gender and sex, hesitation to 'corrupt' children's minds, and 'distract' them from academics are some of the many inaccurate assumptions that impede the delivery of CSE. Governments and civil society organisations need to actively advocate CSE through open conversations. The advocacy may be done through addressing myths on a community level, helping school authorities host workshops for parents, encouraging guardians to understand the pressing need for CSE among their children.

Fostering allyship in delivering CSE through teacher training and sensitisation Teachers play an exceedingly critical role as they are the non-familial adults in children's lives. They are equipped to give sound knowledge and open room for discussion around topics children may hesitate to have with their parents. Hence, teacher sensitisation and awareness programmes are equally essential to deliver CSE and effectively facilitate an empowering environment in school. Educational institutes should recognise the value of teacher-training courses for their faculty. In the long run, involving them in the education and advocacy for sexuality education is of utmost importance for the scalability of CSE in India.

Avoiding binary segregation of classrooms to deliver CSE

It is easy to assume that sexuality education looks different for boys and girls. Many schools in India host CSE workshops in a gender-segregated classroom format, dividing boys and girls to talk about topics only relevant to their sex and cis-gender identity. However, subjects related to gender identities, sexual harassment, and even menstruation should be taught to all gender groups. Moreover, sex-based segregation can be harmful to children who do not identify with the gender-binary segments. Therefore, no subject should be left unaddressed for any gender. A combined classroom setting can also enable cross-gender comfort and give more room for peer-based learning.

CSE's continuity throughout the schooling years

Children of all ages face certain social or sexual situations that they are unable to tackle due to lack of awareness. A comprehensive curriculum on sexuality education includes a wide range of topics appropriately designed for and disseminated to each age group. For instance, according to UNESCO's international technical guidance on sexuality education, a pre-adolescent child should be informed about consent, effective communication, and body anatomy. However, a child aged 15-17 years will be taught what sexual intercourse means and ways to indulge in safe sex practices over and above the same. In this manner, if we implement a graded curriculum in schools that progresses alongside the developmental needs of growing children, the educational needs of each age group are met. Additionally, children's perception of sexuality education will expand beyond sexual and reproductive health alone, establishing that their overall wellbeing is crucial for their positive development as humans.

Developing an ethical digital learning repository

It's important to acknowledge that due to inherent embarrassment and social consciousness instilled in children from an early age, they may not feel comfortable enough to ask personal questions in classrooms and may seek their answers on the internet. Therefore, in addition to offline classroom learning of CSE in schools, both the educators and students should have access to an official repos-

itory that includes all currently existing information related to CSE that's scientifically accurate and validated by experts and doctors in their field. This portal can include educational websites, books, YouTube videos, ethical pornography, information and access to where to purchase subsidised sexual health products such as pads, condoms, etc. It can be made accessible as per the student's age and their official birth date. It can also include resources concerning subsidised mental health support and doctor's appointments.
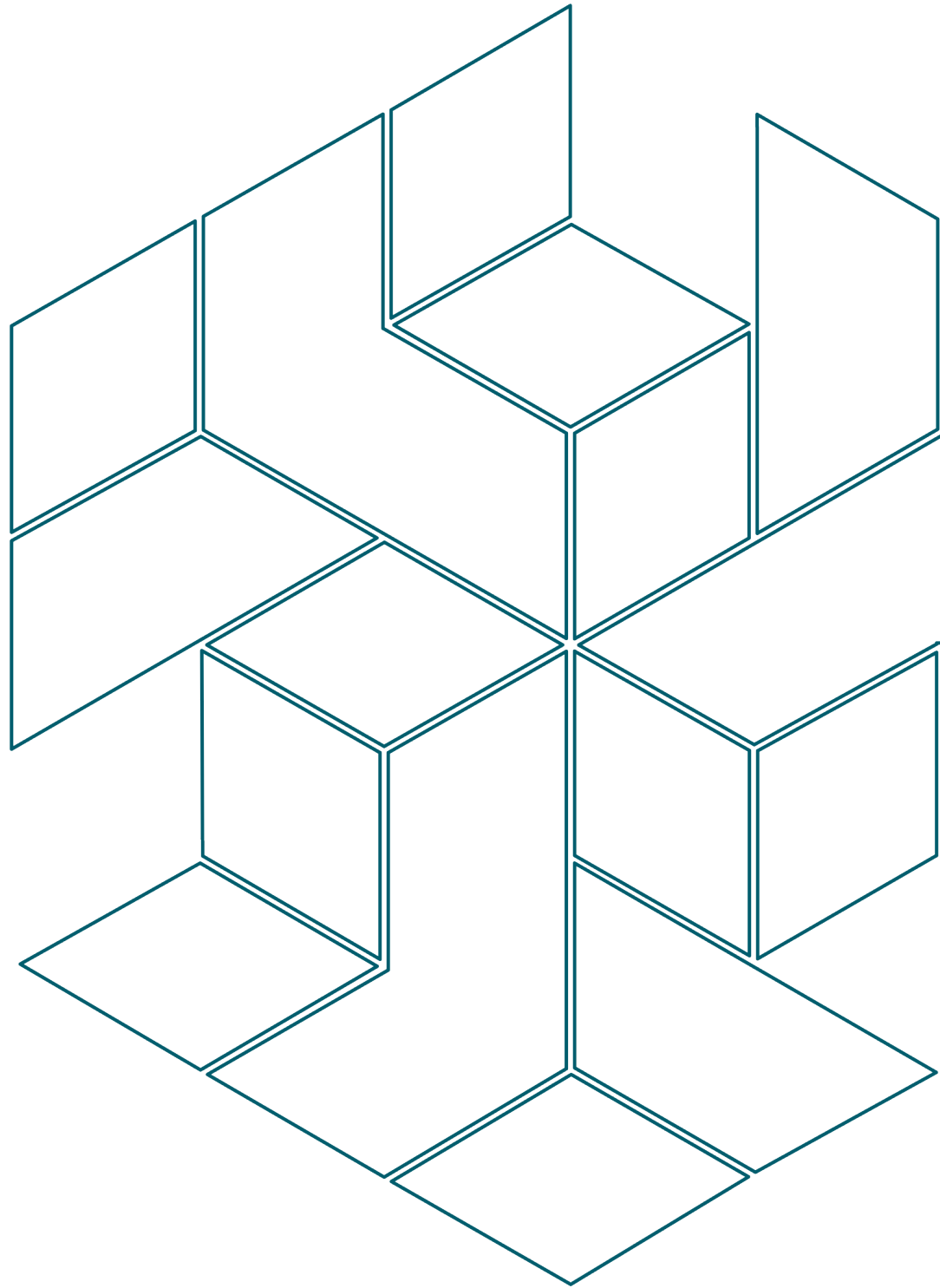
CALL TO ACTION

The highly worrying number of domestic and child sexual violence, bullying, harassment and abuse cases in India prove that we are not paying attention where it is most needed, that is, at the social and sexual health awareness of our youth. India's history and current status with regards to CSE also highlight this glaring need-gap and proves the urgency for the implementation of comprehensive sexuality education across all educational institutions. Acknowledging the cultural and societal challenges that have obstructed such efforts in the past, it is even more important for the government and civil society organisations to raise awareness on the need for comprehensive sexuality education before initiating its accurate and holistic national implementation. This includes busting myths surrounding it on a community level, involving adults in its knowledge and awareness, and encouraging schools to actively advocate for and adopt CSE as a part of their overall education curriculum and affirm the positive influence it will have on growing children.

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